

INTRODUCTION

General Characteristics

The territory of American Samoa is made up of seven islands with a total land area of 76 square miles. Located in the tropics, it is 14 degrees south of the equator and 160-173 degrees west longitude. This island chain is some 2,300 miles southwest of Hawaii and over 4,100 miles southwest of San Francisco. Sydney, Australia is about 2,700 miles further to the southwest, while Auckland, New Zealand is only 1,600 miles southwest. American Samoa is the only United States territory south of the equator.

The seven American Samoan islands are dispersed over 150 miles of water. Tutuila, the main island, is the center of government and business. Its famous Pago Pago harbor is one of the Pacific's deepest and most sheltered harbors. Tutuila has a land area of 56 square miles, with an estimated 95 percent of the 59,600 total population living there. The remaining 20 square miles include the three islands of Ofu, Olosega, and Ta'u in the Manu'a group located 60 miles east of Tutuila. Aunu'u, a small island ¼ mile off the eastern shore of Tutuila and Rose Atoll, a wildlife refuge 60 miles east of Manu'a. Swain's Island is located about 200 miles north of Tutuila.

The location of these islands in the path of the Southeast trade winds results in frequent rains and a pleasant, warm tropical climate. The year-round temperature ranges from 70 to 90 degrees, depending on the warmth of the surrounding ocean. The humidity averages about 80.9 percent during most of the year. The average rainfall at Pago Pago International Airport is 130 inches per year. November to April is the wet season, with December to March being the hottest and most rainy months. Droughts in the months from June to September have occurred, bringing critical water shortages.

The clay and sandy loam soils vary greatly due to the mountain terrain and heavy rains. The soil of the mountain slopes is very thin due to leaching and will support only tough growths of the jungle. However, the soil in the fertile valleys is rich and ideal for growing tropical fruits and staple food crops. In these valleys agriculture is practiced over the entire year. Bananas, taro, and breadfruit, the staple food of the Samoans, grow all year and there usually is an abundance of fish. Most meat and other staple foods are imported.

The People

In 1900, the population totaled 5,679. By April 1, 1990, it rose to 46,773. Current estimate of the population of American Samoa for 1995 now stood at 56,000. The annual rate of population growth between 1980 and 1990 census was 3.7 percent, compared to the annual growth rate of 1.8 percent between 1970 and 1980. This rapid population growth is straining the public infrastructure and the American Samoa Government's ability to provide necessary services.

The population is still ethnically Samoans constituting about 90 percent of all persons. Males continued to outnumber females. The sex ratio in 1990 was 106, meaning that there were 106 males for every 100 females. About 50 percent of the population are below the age of 21 years, suggesting a very young population. Those under 5 years old constituted about 15 percent; 5 to 17 years, about 29 percent; 18 to 64 years, about 47 percent; and 65 years and over made up only 3 percent of the total population. About 55 percent of our population were born in American Samoa;

32 percent born in Western Samoa, 8 percent born in the United States; 3 percent born in Tonga and the remaining 2 percent were born elsewhere.

American Samoans are among the last remaining true Polynesians, along with the Hawaiians, Marisa, Tonga's, and Tahitians. Despite the strong influence of Western Industrial Cultures, American Samoans (more than the other Pacific Islander), seem to hold more tenaciously to their ancient traditions. However, in recent years there appears to be some blending of Western with traditional ways. American Samoa still keeps the "aiga" or extended family as the basis of its social structure. This is a unique system where the "matai" or chief holds control over all of the family's land and property. The "matai" is responsible for the welfare of the family, as well as for its representation in the village and district councils. For the "aiga" to exist and function, each member plays a part in contributing to the welfare of the group, from the chief down to the most elementary tasks performed by the children. The family group also owns land and it is estimated that more than 90 percent of the total acreage in American Samoa is communal family land.

Political System

After US acquisition with the deed of cession signed in 1900, American Samoa became an unincorporated and unorganized territory of the United States administered by the US Navy. In 1951, the administration of the islands was transferred to the US Department of the Interior. The Constitution of American Samoa, approved by the Department of the Interior in April of 1960, established the three branches of government: Executive, Legislative, and Judicial.

Heading the Executive Branch are the Governor and Lieutenant Governor, who were until 1977, appointed by the Department of the Interior. In November 1977, the first popular vote was held and the residents of American Samoa elected its own Governor and Lieutenant Governor. Since November 1980, gubernatorial elections for regular four-year terms began.

The Legislative Branch or "Fono" is composed of 18 members in the Senate and 21 members in the House of Representatives. Each of the 15 political counties in American Samoa elects one or more paramount "matai" to the Senate for a four-year term. The House of Representatives has 20 voting-members elected from 17 representative districts and one non-voting member from Swains Island.

The Judicial Branch consists of a high court and a village court. The Chief Justice and Associate Justice are appointed by the US Secretary of the Interior. The Governor upon recommendations by the Chief Justice and subject to confirmation by the Senate; appoints the Samoan Associate Judges. The High Court is separated into the Divisions of Appellate, Trial, and Land and Titles. The Land and Titles Division has jurisdiction over cases involving land disputes and selection of matai titles.

In 1978, the American Samoa Government had a local representative in Washington, D.C., appointed by the Governor. In November 1980, the people of American Samoa went to the polls to elect a non-voting Delegate to the United States Congress.

Land Tenure System

The local land tenure system merits attention because of its implications for economic development. Local statutes establish five separate categories of land ownership:

1. Freehold lands: Land acquired by individuals prior to 1900. There is no restriction on transfer of titles or lease tenures.
2. Government-owned lands: Transfer from the Department of the Interior and from native owners. Acquisitions via condemnation proceedings, right-of-way easements, and reclaimed lands.
3. Church-owned lands: Acquired through court grants and conveyance by native owners of commercial lands, after approval by the Governor. Lease of church lands to parties other than the American Samoan Government requires approval of the Governor. Law prohibits transfer of title of church lands to non-American Samoans.
4. Individually-owned lands:
5. Communal family land: Land registered in the court as communal family land. Includes 20,000 acres currently registered and 23,000 acres of undeveloped and less accessible land which, will in the future probably revert to communal or individual ownership.

The existing tenure law on communal lands, including individually-owned land, prohibits alienation of any land except freehold land to any person whose blood is less than one-half Samoan. Unless there is written approval by the Governor it is also unlawful for any matai of a Samoan family: (1) to alienate any family lands to any person; or (2) to lease such family lands to any person for any term not exceeding 30 years. Non-American Samoans are not allowed to buy individually-owned land or to lease it for more than 55 years, nor can communal lands be transferred to individuals for the purpose of making such an arrangement with non-Samoans.

A very small percentage of native or communal land has been surveyed and registered. Such registration has never been required because of the potentially negative impact on the culture, and because of strong political objections. Consequently, boundaries have been transitory, allowing for neighboring "aiga" and villages to co-opt land resources. Despite the potential for extended litigation, it is expected that the amount of communal land being registered and utilized will probably increase, so as to prevent encroachments of homesteaders or unwitting settlement by neighboring families. Communal landowners are beginning to recognize the necessity of protecting their property rights in the face of existing laws which permits forfeiture of unused land.

A very significant development since the mid-1970s (and will likely to continue), is the increasing transfer of communal land to individually owned land. Reasons for this change are:

- a growing number of nuclear Samoan families want to break away from the communal obligations that are required of those who settle on communal land;
- individual members of a family do not have perpetual rights to communal lands and, therefore, the acquisition of individually-owned land would assure that such property could be willed to children or other heirs;
- Individually owned native land is an acceptable form of collateral for obtaining home and business loans.

Although the Fono established a separation-of-structure-from-land agreement in 1962 to provide lending institutions with more security, financing activity by local private institutions was negligible. These local institutions contended that the current safeguards were not adequate to support private land development. "They advocated an extension of the lease tenure system and establishment of a mortgage foreclosure law. The Fono, in 1978, passed bill (Public Law 15-88) extending the lease in land laws are in accord with the peoples wishes, the law required passage a

second time by a new session of the legislature. This confirmatory bill was passed in 1979 (Public Law 16-49) and the chief beneficiary of the legislation has been the residential housing construction industry.

Economy

American Samoa has a small developing economy, which is dominated by the American Samoa Government, Tuna Canning and most recently, Garment Manufacturing. These made up over 70 percent of employment in the labor force. The rest of economy consists of retail trade and service establishments.

Total employment in American Samoa rose over this period, from 12,396 in 1989 to 12,593 in 1990, a modest increase of 197 jobs, far less than the growth in population. This increase was due to the strong growth in the retail trade and service industries. Employment at the tuna canneries, which together became the largest place of employment in 1989, declined by almost 100. There was a modest decrease in ASG employment, as well as an increase in the number of unemployed. American Samoa's current narrow economic base is not adequate to meet the demand for employment. The government has sought to diversify its economy by seeking outside investment in light industries (particularly in garment manufacturing), farming and fishing, tourism and regional trade and services. However, the disadvantage of a remote location, lack of skilled manpower, limited infrastructure and the lack of significant comparative advantages (such as labor cost) over other Pacific Islands have yet to be overcome.

American Samoa's Balance of Trade mirrors the dominance of the tuna canneries. Total exports are almost exclusively products of the tuna canneries. Total exports fell again for the second straight year from \$307.5 million in 1989 to \$306 million in 1990. This follows a \$60 million decline in exports from 1988 to 1989. 1988 posted the first trade surplus in over ten years.

The local consumer price index (CPI) reflects the increase in the price of imported goods, primarily from the US. Currently, the local inflation rate has been running at an annual rate of 5 percent in 1992. This is down from a CPI high of 7.7 percent posted in 1990 driven by the increase in petroleum prices in the Territory.

The secondary, non-cannery sector of the economy is made up primarily of firms in the retail trade, construction, manufacturing financial services, service industries, and since 1995 the BCTC - Garment Manufacturing industry. The number of registered businesses increased between 1989 and 1990. 1990 exhibited strong growth in this sector with 115 new business registered representing 7.2 percent growth rate. Typically, local businesses are small, owned by independent local operators, and sell exclusively to the local market. They face high costs due to limited access to capital, low managerial skills, the costs due to limited access to capital, low managerial skills, the need to import most goods and raw materials, and high labor costs compared to the rest of the region. High costs and the distance to markets restrict their ability to export. Thus, local businesses are vulnerable to competition from neighboring islands with lower wage levels and from larger, more efficient businesses in the U.S.

Driven by the growth of the tuna industry, annual household income and expenditure has been increasing. Annual household expenditure increased from \$55.7 million in 1982 to \$82.4 million in 1988. In constant dollars (1982 = 100) household expenditure in 1988 was \$71.5 million. In

percentage terms the biggest increases were expenditures on transportation, services and church donations. The biggest declines were on food, housing and school fees.

Despite this increase in household expenditure, approximately 56 percent of the American Samoa population were below the national poverty level. This figure is based on the official report of the 1990 Census of American Samoa.